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Public notification helps protect public health

Public notification a top priority

Water systems must deliver safe and reliable drinking water to their customers 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. If the drinking water supply becomes contaminated, many people can become seriously ill or die. Any time a water system has a situation that poses a risk to public health, they are required by state and federal law to notify their customers.

The Office of Drinking Water's highest priority is responding to drinking water emergencies and working hand-in-hand with water systems. Notifying water system customers as quickly as possible when their water may not be safe to drink, gives them time to take actions to protect their health.

Revised public notification regulation

The recently revised public notification requirements help ensure that customers will always know if there is a problem with their drinking water that poses a risk to their health.

The new requirements apply to all Group A public water systems – those systems that serve more than 25 people – and must be met whenever a system is in violation of:

- Drinking water quality or monitoring requirements;
- Operating under a variance or exemption; or
- Other situations that pose a public health risk, such as a disruption in service.

Notifying customers in a timely manner about actual or potential threats associated with drinking their tap water can help people make informed decisions affecting their health. Customers will be notified within 24 hours if there is a serious problem.

Public notification also provides an opportunity for water purveyors to educate their customers about their drinking water quality – building trust by sharing information openly. Notices used in this positive way can help customers understand the basis for rate increases that may be needed for additional drinking water treatment and protection.

Key issues of public interest

Changes to timing and distribution requirements for notices are based on the potential health impact of the violation or event. The violations and events are separated into three tiers based on potential health impact:

- **Tier 1:** Acute health concerns require notification within 24 hours.
- **Tier 2:** Chronic health concerns require notification within 30 days.
- **Tier 3:** Reporting and monitoring violations require notification within 365 days.

Other aspects of the revised public notification rules include:

- An expanded list of violations and situations requiring 24-hour notification.
- Simplified health effects language.
- Standard language for monitoring violations.
- A requirement that purveyors send a copy of all public notifications and the certification of compliance with public notification regulations to the Department of Health.
- Allowing notices for individual violations to be combined into the annual Consumer Confidence Report, if public notification requirements can still be met.

Technical assistance

To aid water systems in implementing the revised regulation, EPA and the Association of State Drinking Water Administrators developed a Public Notification Handbook that includes sample public notices. It is available at <http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/dw/Publications/PNhandbook.pdf>

The Office of Drinking Water is currently working on implementation of the new public notification program and should have more information available on the Drinking Water web site later this year.

If you are a drinking water purveyor and you have questions, please feel free to call your Office of Drinking Water Regional Office. They are open Monday through Friday, 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. If you have an after-hours emergency, call 1-877-481-4901.

Eastern Regional Office, 509-456-3115

Serving Adams, Asotin, Benton, Chelan, Columbia, Douglas, Ferry, Franklin, Garfield, Grant, Kittitas, Klickitat, Lincoln, Okanogan, Pend Oreille, Spokane, Stevens, Walla Walla, Whitman, and Yakima counties.

Northwest Regional Office, 253-395-6750

Island, King, Pierce, San Juan, Skagit, Snohomish, and Whatcom counties.

Southwest Regional Office, 360-664-0768

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More detailed information about staff contacts can be found at:

http://www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/dw/Staff_Lists/dwnames.htm

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